

SAIVITE HINDUISM: IMAGES FOR CONTEMPLATION AND EXTERNAL WORSHIP

One of the most comprehensive images is Nataraja. It has four hands and two legs. The hand that bears the drum represents God's act of evolving the universe and giving us our bodies. Just as a drum produces vibrations in the air and causes sound, so God produces motion in Maya and causes the evolution of the universe. This is how the drum symbolizes creation. Another hand, with the palm turned towards the worshipper telling him not to be afraid of anything, represents the sustenance of the universe. As fire burns things and makes them disappear, so God makes the universe return to its original form of Maya. The two feet represent the double aspect of the goal. The foot that crushes the dwarf symbolizes the Love of God which counteracts the power of Anava and frees the soul from its hold. The uplifted foot stands for eternal bliss which is the second aspect of the goal, and the fourth hand point to it. The smile of love also has a double significance. It silences the gospel of hatred and suspicion preached by Anavic influences and offers a cordial welcome to the worshipper. The eye in the forehead is the light of pure knowledge which dispels ignorance. The two ordinary eyes represent the powers to desire good and to do good. The contemplation of this image includes contemplation of God and Soul.

1

In the suggestive nature of the image of Nataraja, the first hand tells the worshipper that God has given him his body and habitation for his benefit, and that he should make the best use of them and of his time. He must use them in the service of God and not in securing fleeting and harmful pleasures of the senses. The second hand is the hand of hope, indication that man need not fear anything but should work for his salvation. The third hand warns him of the uncertainty of his life in this world, that the body may perish at any time, and that he should not postpone his useful activities but work while he may. The foot that rests on the dwarf wants the worshipper to imitate it and crush with his wisdom the Anavic influence and all the wrong desires created by it. The fourth hand and the uplifted foot show his destination of infinite bliss. The smile engenders love for God, and the three eyes exhort the worshipper to think correctly, desire correctly and act correctly. The eye on the forehead particularly condemns wrong desires. The image of Nataraja is a perpetual sermon, initiates religious contemplation and serves as a suitable object of long and continued adoration. It attunes the mind to God, and attaches it to Him. The mind is then filled with the thought of God and the body influenced by the mind becomes the tool of God. The tongue sings praises of God, the body prostrates before Him, and the mind goes into ecstasy at the thought of Him. The worshipper loses his individuality and is possessed by God.

2

Of images representing single attributes of God, five are essential. God's first and foremost attribute is love. There should be a separate image to represent love and nothing but

love. The highest form of love that is known to us is that of the mother. Therefore, the love of God is represented as the mother. To signify God's love, the image must possess something super-anthropomorphic. The Saiva image of God's love is called Uma. U-M-A-these three letters are mystic symbols and represent respectively the love of God which sustains, involves, evolves the universe. It represents a mother, but has four hands instead of two. Almost all images of Saiva worship have at least four hands, two of which are the same in all. One of these two is the uplifted hand corresponding to the second hand of Nataraja, which exhorts the worshipper not to be afraid of anything and offers to protect him. The other hand, like the fourth hand of Nataraja, points to the feet which symbolize the ultimate goal of true knowledge and infinite bliss. In pointing to the feet, it tells him by implication that it is wrong for him to be absorbed in worldly wants and cares, and that he should more and more engage himself in the wants of the soul and lead a life of usefulness.

3

The second image that gives a partial representation of God pictures Him as the Lord of the Universe. The Saiva doctrine calls such an image Vinayaka, literally, He who was no lord above (himself). This image has something like the proboscis of the elephant of which the straight portion represents the Universe of knowledge and the bent portion the Universe of motion.

These two images, that of Uma and Vinayaka, remind the worshipper of God's infinite love and His Lordship of Universe.

In spite of the knowledge of these two great attributes, man forgets God and gives the first place to himself, that is to his bodily self. If he has a business that concerns his bodily self at a time fixed for worship of God, he prefers to attend to his worldly business thoughts of his worldly affairs drive out thoughts of God. It is important to root out this tendency of giving first place to oneself and second place to God. An image that can show this idea then becomes necessary. A great Saiva saint said, "Is there anyone in this Universe so insignificant as myself or so great as you?" The Saiva image that instils this thought is called 'Bhairava'.

4

Another tendency in man is to give second place to God and first place to "My-ness", that is something important to him from a worldly point of view. This is the second obstacle to religious life. An image is necessary to impress this thought. Saivism has prescribed such an image and has called it Veerabhadra.

Having overcome the assertion, I-ness and My-ness, man is able to devote himself to the uninterrupted and single-minded worship of God, and now wants to submit to God for His guidance and control. He stands pledged to implicit obedience and discipline as before a Guru. The fifth partial image that he is therefore that of a Guru. This image is named Subrahmanya. It is more comprehensive than even Nataraja, because it represents the Guru as well as God. It has six faces, which represent respectively the Lordship of the Universe and the five great acts of God, creation of bodies, sustenance, destruction, counter-action of worldliness and the

illumination of the soul. It has twelve hands symbolizing various attributes. One of these holds a javelin, which is the symbol of pure knowledge.

The Siva Linga is an amorphous image. It resembles a pillar and represents the spiritual flame that destroys all ignorance and enlightens the soul. Being synthetic in form, it is suited to the worship of more advanced souls.

The images mentioned above are so complex that people of inferior mental powers cannot grasp their meaning. Such people must be provided with simpler symbols of which two specimens used by Saivites are given below: -

One of these is the trident. Its three branches represent the five gifts of God, two branches representing two each and the third representing one. The main part of it symbolizes God Himself. This is a very simple image both for external worship and for mental worship.

The second is the sacred ashes. This represents the love of God. Fire has burnt cow dung, removed its impurities, and has changed it to a beautiful form. So the love of God nullifies the power of Anava and makes the soul divine. When a worshipper wears sacred ashes on the forehead, must feel that Love of God is on him, and cultivate the habit of avoiding deeds that are unworthy of one who wears the Love of God. Besides, as he puts on the ashes, he repeats songs in praise of the Love of God, which heighten the feeling.

- “The Saiva School of Hinduism”
S. Sivapathasundaram

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